

## Society for Historians of the Early American Republic

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### Review

Reviewed Work(s): The Autobiography of a Criminal by Henry Tufts and Neal Keating

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Source: *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring, 1994), pp. 116-118

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press on behalf of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3124616>

Accessed: 08-09-2018 20:26 UTC

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trade led to the seizure of *Boston*, the murder of all but two of the crew, and the appropriation of the ship's goods and the two survivors as slaves.

In a concise foreword, Richard Inglis explains how the overfishing of the sea otters sought for trade by the European and American vessels on the coast led Maquinna, who required trade goods to maintain his status and prestige, to take *Boston*.

While a recent version of Jewitt's published narrative remains in print, this book provides under one cover the pertinent documentation: the narrative, Jewitt's rarely published manuscript journal, and a playbill for the drama, "The Armourer's Escape," presented by Jewitt, who played himself.

The loss of fur trading vessels by misadventure attracted considerable attention from the reading public, just as it does from historians today. The loss of *Boston* and the famous narrative of John Jewitt instilled a particular view of the perils of the trade. More importantly, Jewitt's tale represents a little examined aspect of the trade in the cultural consequences of the maritime fur trade.

Richard Inglis's foreword offers a broader cultural perspective to the tale. Yet this reviewer would prefer to see other, less famous narratives integrated in a work that incorporates the trade and these incidents from a native perspective, placing the trade's at times volatile and contentious activities within a broader cultural and social context. A comprehensive analysis of the cultural interaction and consequences among the native peoples of Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska, and the Europeans and Americans who came to the coast to trade for fur remains to be written.

*Vancouver Maritime Museum*

James P. Delgado

***The Autobiography of a Criminal.*** By Henry Tufts. Foreword by Neal Keating. (Port Townsend: Loompanics Unlimited, 1993. Pp. xxix, 227. Illustrations. Paper, \$12.95.)

The first criminal act perpetrated in *The Autobiography of a Criminal* is the title's imposture. The original text recounting the experiences of Henry Tufts, a colonial thief, was published in 1807 as *A Narrative of the Life, Adventures, Travels and Sufferings of Henry Tufts*. The second criminal act perpetrated by Neal Keating's edition is the author's imposture. Tufts did not write the narrative of his life. Readers familiar with the original text will understand, and possibly forgive, these two impostures, but those unfamiliar with either Tufts or his book will be

confused by the counterfeits. A few words of caution are necessary.

The original text, printed by Samuel Bragg in Dover, New Hampshire, is a marvelous and outrageous first-person account narrating Tufts's experiences as a thief, scoundrel, and swindler. Merging conventions of European picaresque with American criminal confessions, the narrative ostensibly was written as a warning to the "rising generation . . . to avoid those quicksands of vice," but readers of the early republic were titillated far more than they were educated by the narrator's moral and civil trespasses (276). There were, in fact, too many such trespasses for Tufts's contemporaries; the book did not sell well and was generally—but not entirely—forgotten. Throughout the nineteenth century a few local historians mentioned Tufts and the book, if only to condemn them both, but in 1888 Thomas Wentworth Higginson published a highly favorable essay on the man and his narrative in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. While ignored by most critics and historians in the twentieth century, Edmund Pearson resurrected the text in 1930. After correcting "obvious misprints," adding chapter titles and engravings, and editing out about forty pages and the preface from the original text, Pearson published his edition as *The Autobiography of a Thief*. What made Pearson's edition valuable was his introduction and epilogue, which offered exceptional insight into the text's history and authenticity.

While omitting the introduction and epilogue, Keating's edition borrows the Pearson text exactly, including all changes and edited passages. Although he even includes Pearson's helpful notes (marked "E. P."), Keating does not nearly enough recognize his debt to his predecessor, who is barely mentioned. In place of Pearson's scholarly commentary, Keating has added his own "Foreword," which is as curious as it is unreliable. A few examples: "If breaking the laws was something worth writing about, then it must have also been worth doing"; "What we really lust after is the approbation of the cosmos, which is nothing other than a celebration of the whirling hubbub in its entirety and chaotic complexity" (ii). Placing him at the beginning of a long line of anarchists, rebels, and vagabonds, Keating perceives Tufts as a "land pirate" whose crimes are "unsanctioned responses to the pressures of capital" (v, vi). Not surprisingly, the words "hegemony" and "hegemonic" are often repeated. Readers interested in reliable historical insight are advised to hunt up a copy of Pearson's 1930 edition or turn to more recent scholarship by Daniel A. Cohen or Daniel E. Williams.

The most serious problem with Keating's commentary is that he has little conception of early American print culture. The narrator is

taken not as a character created for an audience, but as a literal person, although Keating was aware that at least one whole section of the narrative was fictionalized and that the historical Tufts was semi-literate at best. The Tufts narrative is significant, not because the historical figure was adept in the “science of deception,” but because a fictional narrator claimed such adeptness in a textual commodity created for readers of the early republic (93).

The bottom line, however, is that I will order Keating’s text for my graduate seminar in the spring—despite the introduction’s unreliability, and despite Keating’s misquoting two of my essays, listing only one in his bibliography, and then misspelling my name. I think that the Tufts narrative is so interesting that I would order it in a plain brown wrapper. Moreover, I have come to appreciate Keating’s edition as a marvelous reflection of popular American culture. Published by Loompanics Unlimited, a small radical press in Port Townsend, Washington, *The Autobiography of a Thief* has a wonderfully lurid cover illustration and an equally wonderful publications list following the text. Along with the Tufts narrative, readers can order *The Complete Guide to Lock Picking*, *How to Steal Food from the Supermarket*, and *The Art & Science of Dumpster Diving*. Tufts certainly would have enjoyed this new edition of his textual life.

*University of Mississippi*

Daniel E. Williams

***Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802.*** By Douglas R. Egerton. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993. Pp. xvii, 262. Map, illustrations. \$39.95; paper, \$13.95.)

The slaves who made these two Virginia conspiracies (in which about thirty were executed) are depicted as acculturated, urban, skilled, mobile, and in an era of new light fervor as not particularly religious. This familiar profile is enhanced by arguments that they also “spoke the language of artisan republicanism: of whites who sometimes sided with them, and with whom they often worked” (51). The conspirators’ talk of dining with merchants and sparing some property indicates too, as Eugene D. Genovese has argued, that they were imbued with liberal bourgeois attitudes. As for the white skipper who apparently tried to carry Gabriel to safety downriver to Norfolk, he may have been influenced by an “interracial nautical proletariat” (105).